



OPERATION TRAPDOOR

Introduction

Law enforcement officials and retailers report that the use of false ID contributes significantly to underage alcohol access (U.S. Inspector General, 1991). "False" identification includes counterfeit and altered ID's as well as ID's that are real, but borrowed from another person. Young people easily obtain false ID, and increasingly, the Internet is a source.

Research conducted by Preusser et al. (1997) suggests that young people commonly carry false ID. They surveyed 4,000 underage college and high school students in New York and Pennsylvania; 36 percent reported having used some form of false ID. Over the last three years, the San Diego Police Department alone has received in excess of 6,000 false ID's seized by local bar and nightclub door people.

Despite the prevalence of false ID, young people report that they use them infrequently (Biko Associates, 1998; Grube, 1997; Wagenaar et al, 1993). Instead, they try to buy without ID, which reduces their risk of being caught with a false ID. But, as more merchants have begun checking ID, minors have turned to false ID as a way to obtain alcohol.

Description

In 1995, the Chico Police Department developed a multi-agency task force that targets minors who are either trying to purchase alcohol or trying to enter a bar or night club with false ID. The task force, developed through an ABC grant, included local law enforcement, ABC and Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) investigators.

In 1999, the San Diego Police Department expanded the program and named it "Operation Trapdoor." During the operation, ABC licensees contact law enforcement when they have a person with false ID at their business. With roving teams of investigators in the area, the response time is nearly immediate. When the investigators arrive, they arrest and interview the minor. They release the minor on a misdemeanor citation or, in extreme cases, take the minor into custody.

Goals and Objectives

The primary goal is to reduce underage consumption of, and access to, alcohol by arresting minors who possess false ID. A secondary goal is to generate leads and develop potential confidential informants that will lead back to counterfeit operations and ID "mills." Objectives are to:

- Form an interagency task force to enhance good liaison among the agencies
- Increase public awareness about the consequences of false ID possession by involving the media and the community
- Deter use of false ID by citing or arresting violators

Program Components

- **GAIN AGENCY COOPERATION.** A high level of cooperation among local law enforcement, DMV and ABC provides the staffing and expertise needed for a successful operation. Each team is normally comprised of at least three people, one from each entity. This gives each team member a specific responsibility and gives the team broad experience. Generally, local law enforcement handles a majority of the arrests. The DMV investigator handles any counterfeit cases and the ABC investigator lends expertise on any ABC violations found.
- **COORDINATE THE INVESTIGATION.** Planning should begin at least four to six weeks in advance, giving consideration to changing work schedules, overtime authorization, and shifting investigative priorities. Many agencies complete their work schedules at least one to two months in advance. Prior notice helps eliminate a staffing shortage on the day of the operation. The host agency ensures that maps, clear directions and building access codes are sent to the participating agency supervisors to disseminate to their personnel.

- **IDENTIFY LOCATIONS OF ACTIVITY.** Officers collect and review complaints, prior arrests, information provided by citizens, parents, school officials, patrol/campus police officers, community groups, special event organizers and businesses. Often, the local law enforcement and ABC investigators will already know the places where they will find youth with false ID. Select locations based on the above and the level of cooperation between the business and law enforcement. In addition, analyze prime hours for this activity. Most communities find violations peak from 9:30 p.m. to 2:00 a.m.
- **MEDIA.** When minors perceive no risk other than *confiscation*, there is little to deter possession of a false ID. Strong media involvement amplifies the deterrent effect. Talk to media people well in advance to create interest. Discuss the timing of the story release with the media. A news release at the end of the first day may allow you to see if the media coverage has had an effect on the number of arrests on the second day.
- **NOTIFY BUSINESSES.** The operation supports licensees existing efforts to combat underage drinking. Pass out flyers announcing the dates of the operation and a contact phone number for businesses to call when they have someone with a false ID. Advise licensees to have their door people tell suspects, "I'd be happy to let you in. I'll just have my manager double check this ID. He'll be right back." The door person then calls the designated phone number, and the investigative team responds. This is also a good time to give the business dates of upcoming Licensee Education on Alcohol and Drugs (LEAD) Program trainings offered free by ABC.

Results and Impact

Among the many benefits is an immediate increase in enforcement staffing on a high activity weekend and the public relations benefit of a balanced approach to enforcement. That is, enforcement that focuses not only on the practices of licensed businesses, but on young people too. The end result is a strong enforcement profile enhanced by media and word-of-mouth communication about the consequences of false ID possession.

Case Example: San Diego, California

In 1998, the San Diego Police Department initiated a joint operation along with ABC and DMV. The two-day operation netted 25 arrests, and businesses seized 15 ID's when people ran before investigators could arrive.

A news story by the San Diego Union Tribune came out the morning of the second day. The story contained interviews with local business owners and Detective Kerry Mensior, who was in charge of the operation. There were fewer arrests and ID seizures on the second day.

In early 1999, a similar two-day operation netted 20 arrests and 12 more ID's seized. During both operations, officers made several more arrests for drunk in public, battery and resisting arrest. During the undercover inspections, investigators noted a number of ABC violations when they were not busy arresting minors for false ID possession.

Quantitative Measures

With good media coverage at the end of the first night, success can be measured by the number of people arrested for possession of false ID the first night versus the second night. In addition, if officers run two or more operations in a close time frame, (one on Memorial Day and another on the Fourth of July), one can compare the difference in arrests.

Further measures include the number of arrests; the number of suspects booked versus released on misdemeanor notices to appear; and the ages of the arrested suspects. Data might also include whether the youths are students at particular colleges or schools.

Qualitative Measures

Qualitative measures include declarations of satisfaction from licensees, local law enforcement officers, participating agencies and community members. The program has also strengthened the working relationship between ABC, DMV, local law enforcement agencies, local community leaders, and alcohol industry members.

Funding

Costs are minimal and results are immediate and lasting. No special funding is needed because personnel hours are charged to normal enforcement budgets. Local agencies generally use traffic, vice or patrol hours. Since operations are run past normal working hours, there may be overtime costs involved.

Contact Information

For further information concerning this strategy, please contact:

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